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Safety management poor in construction industry

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Feature: 1 July 2005 - Occupational safety and health is poor in the Bhutanese construction industry. It is not given a priority and employment of safety measures during construction is often considered a burden, according to a broad safety survey conducted in 2004.



Safety signs are not displayed at work sites

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The lack of realistic legislative standards on construction safety makes it difficult to safeguard the interest of occupational safety and health in the industry.

However, given the booming construction industry in the country, a greater concern for the safety and health problems is called for. The concern becomes even greater given that Bhutanese contractors are still oriented to traditional skills and resort to heavy manual work with an unskilled workforce that is transient in nature and generally unorganized.

A broad safety survey was conducted from September to December, 2004, with some construction companies and the government regulatory agencies relevant to construction industry in Bhutan to better understand their safety management practices.



Key elements of construction safety management like policy, organization and implementation, measuring performances, and reviewing performances were used by the study as a framework.



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Management approach to health and safety in construction industry can be looked at in three important ways: the legal point of view, with the need to abide by the rules and regulations in place; the socio-humanitarian aspects, considering the human lives involved and; the financial-economic aspects of accidents which have high direct and indirect costs.

In the Bhutanese construction industry the five key elements of construction safety and health management system were practiced in varying degrees despite numerous problems confronting the current safety situations at construction sites.

Major findings include lack of safety regulations and standards, low priority of safety, lack of competent manpower, and lack of safety promotion. One of the main management approaches to health and safety in construction industry, the legal requirements or the need to abide by the rules and regulations of the country is lacking in Bhutan.

The only legal instrument protecting the interest of the workers at construction sites today is the Wage, Recruitment Agencies and Workmen's compensation Act, 1994. The Act, however, has no special provisions for workers' safety and the general conditions of workers are not addressed.

At the moment there is also no national occupational safety and health policy being implemented by the government. Safety standards and codes which often accompany the regulations as means of providing information and guidance on the practical interpretation of the same and which are the main tools for implementing good safety management systems are lacking, too.

In absence of realistic legislative standards on safety, even the project specific contract documents fail to include the safety aspects of the construction works. As such, safety is definitely not the top priority of construction companies in Bhutan. In fact it ranks last on their priority list.

The concept of 'lowest bid' or 'lowest evaluated bid' prevalent in the Bhutanese construction industry has also given rise to low priority of safety since safety provisions are not considered in effort to offer the lowest bids.

The study has revealed that low priority of safety can adversely affect the safety management practices of the construction companies. Companies with low safety priority have lesser frequency of safety meetings, safety inspections, and accident investigation and reporting.

Most of the construction companies in Bhutan are small sized family run business with little or no technical knowledge and capabilities to deal with site safety management. These companies also cannot afford to employ full-time engineers and safety specialists at their construction sites. Besides, even the government agencies lack competent and certified safety

inspectors.

The lack of certified skilled labour is another problem in the Bhutanese construction industry. Most workers at the construction sites are unskilled, untrained, and inexperienced expatriate labourers.

Their nature of employment in the construction companies is short and temporary, and they move from project to project.

As such, this transient nature of workers coupled with their high turnover makes it difficult for the contractors to train them on safety and health at construction sites. In any case, no training programs exist for supervisors and workers on construction sites concerning hazards and safety problems. Therefore, workers are not aware of the safety requirements at sites. There is also no in-country safety training facilities.

Promoting safety awareness is one of the important ways to reduce construction accidents. Yet in Bhutan it is one of the least attended areas. The study showed that very few companies claimed to have written safety policies and provide incentives for the workers with good safety performances.

The majority of companies didn't have proper safety signs and posters displayed prominently at their construction sites. Also there is little or no data available on safety at construction sites in Bhutan. There are no official sources to indicate how many accidents have occurred at construction sites and how much money has been spent on those accidents. Thus, in absence of accident statistics there are no safety performance indicators as well.

If you cannot measure safety, then you certainly cannot manage it. Besides, so far there have been no safety incentives programmes, no safety workshops/seminars have been held, and no accident data and safety reports have been published by any government agencies. Further, even the insurance premiums are fixed irrespective of the safety records of the construction companies. Many are also not aware of the Wage, Recruitment Agencies, and Workmen's compensation Act, 1994.

Health and safety legislation supported by a regulating body is non-existent in Bhutan. As such, there is ever growing need for realistic safety legislative standards to enforce safety in construction.

The existing legislation needs to be updated or amended to keep pace with the changing times. Currently there is no safety agency in any of the government organisations related to construction industry in Bhutan to support the safety legislations.

To this effect a safety agency could be established under the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources to act as a central agency for coordinating safety implementation and enforcement in the Bhutanese construction industry.

The level of safety awareness among the construction industry personnel is very poor in Bhutan. Promoting and communicating

safety to the people in the construction industry through safety and health trainings, workshops and seminars, incentive programmes, and safety campaigns through public media can create improved safety awareness. Engineers, supervisors, and workers need to be adequately trained in safety requirements on construction sites.

Workers need to be educated about common safety hazards and safety problems at work sites, their right to a safe working environment, and also their right to injury claims against accidents at work sites.

Safety will not improve unless there is a demand or incentive provided to the contractors. Where the main concern of a contractor is how to save money and reduce costs, the initiative for improved safety must come from the client.

There is an immediate need to have an effective accident data collection system in place. Without safety records the impact of accidents on construction industry both in terms of humanitarian and economic losses cannot be assessed.

The current safety management practices of the contractors in Bhutan need to be drastically improved in terms of documentation and its effective implementations.

Contributed by Kin Dorji, AIT, Thailand

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